

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT BUYING A FUR COAT, BY RUTH KATZ

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JFK THE REAL THING



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THAT DAY I WAS IN IRELAND, IN THE DARK, HARD northern city of Belfast. I was there with my father, who had been away from the city where he was born for more than 30 years. He was an American now—survivor of the Depression and poverty, father of seven children, fanatic of baseball—but he was greeted as a returning Irishman by his brother Frank and his surviving Irish friends, and there were many Irish tears and much Irish laughter, waterfalls of beer, and all the old Irish songs of defiance and loss. Billy Hamill was home. And on the evening of November 22, I was in my cousin Frankie's house in a section called Andersonstown, dressing to go down to see the old man in a place called the Rock Bar. The television was on in the parlor. Frankie's youngest kids were playing on the floor. A frail rain was falling outside.

And then the program was interrupted and a BBC announcer came on, his face grave, to say that the president of the United States had been shot in Dallas. Everything in the room stopped. In his clipped, abrupt voice, the announcer said that the details were sketchy. Everyone turned to me, the visiting American, as if I would know if this were true. I mumbled, talked nonsense—maybe it was a mistake; sometimes these things are moved on the wires too fast—but my stomach was churning. The regular program resumed; the kids went back to playing. A few minutes later, the announcer returned, and this time his voice was unsteady. It was true. John F. Kennedy, the president of the United States, was dead.

I remember whirling in pain and fury, slamming the wall with my hand, and reeling out into the night. All over the city, thousands of human beings were doing the same thing. Doors slammed and sudden wails went up. *Oh, sweet Jesus, they shot Jack! And They killed President Kennedy! And He's been shot*

dead! At the foot of the Falls Road, I saw an enraged man punching a tree. Another man sat on the curb, sobbing into his hands. Trying to be a reporter, I wandered over to the Shankill Road, the main Protestant avenue in that city so long divided by religion. It was the same there. *Holy God, they've killed President Kennedy:* with men weeping and children running with the news and bawling women everywhere. It was a scale of grief I'd never seen before or since in any place on earth. John Fitzgerald Kennedy wasn't "the Catholic president" to the people of the Shankill or the Falls; he was the young and shining prince of the Irish diaspora.

I ended up at the Rock Bar, climbing to the long, smoky upstairs room. The place was packed. At a corner table, my father was sitting with two old IRA men. They were trying to console him when he was beyond consolation. For the immigrants of his generation, Jack Kennedy was always special. After 1960, they knew that their children truly could be anything in their new country, including president.

"They got him, they got him," he said, embracing me and sobbing into my shoulder. "The dirty sons of bitches, they got him."

And then "The Star-Spangled Banner" was playing on the television set, and everyone in the place, 100 of them at least, rose and saluted. They weren't saluting the American flag, which was superimposed over Kennedy's face. They were saluting the fallen president who in some special way was their president too. The anthem ended. We drank a lot of whiskey together. We watched bulletins from Dallas. We cursed the darkness. And then there was a film of Kennedy in life. Visiting Ireland for three days the previous June.

There he was, smiling in that curious way, at once genuine and detached, capable of fondness and irony. The wind was tossing his hair. He was playing with the top button of his jacket. He was standing next to Eamon De Valera, the



A LOST TIME: AN ENTIRE GENERATION
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president of Ireland. He was laughing with the mayor of New Ross in County Wexford. He was being engulfed by vast crowds in Dublin. He seemed to be having a very good time. And then he was at the airport to say his farewell, and in the Rock Bar, we heard him speak:

"Last night, somebody sang a song, the words of which I'm sure you know, of 'Come back to Erin, mavourneen, mavourneen, come back aroun' to the land of thy birth. Come with the shamrock in the springtime, mavourneen...'. This is not the land of my birth, but it is the land for which I hold the greatest affection." A pause and a smile. "And I certainly will come back in the springtime."

II

TWENTY-FIVE SPRINGTIMES HAVE COME AND GONE, and for those of us who were young then, those days live on in vivid detail. We remember where we were and how we lived and who we were in love with. We remember the images on television screens, black-and-white and grainy: Lee Harvey Oswald dying over and over again as Jack Ruby steps out to blow him into eternity; Jacqueline Kennedy's extraordinary wounded grace; Caroline's baffled eyes and John-John saluting. We remember the drumrolls and the riderless horse.

But across the years, there have been alterations made in the reputation of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Those who hated him on November 21, 1963, continue to hate him now. Some who were once his partisans have turned upon him with the icy retrospective contempt that is the specialty of the neoconservative faith. And time itself has altered his once-glistening presence in the national consciousness. An entire generation has come to maturity with no memory at all of the Kennedy years; for them, Kennedy is the name of an airport or a boulevard or a high school.

Certainly, the psychic wound of his sudden death appears to have healed. The revisionists have come forward; Kennedy's life and his presidency have been examined in detail, and for some, both have been found wanting. The presidency, we have been told, was incomplete, a sad perhaps; the man himself was deeply flawed. Some of this thinking was a reaction to the overwrought mythologizing of the first few years after Dallas. The selling of "Camelot" was too insistent, too fevered, accompanied by too much sentimentality and too little rigorous thought. The Camelot metaphor was never used during Kennedy's 1,000 days (Jack himself might have dismissed the notion with a wry or obscene remark); it first appeared in an interview Theodore H. White did with Jacqueline after the assassination. But it pervaded many of the first memoirs about the man and his time.

Some of the altered vision of Kennedy comes from the coarsening of the collective memory by the endless stream of books about the assassination itself. We've had the 26 volumes of the Warren Commission report and dozens of analyses detailing its sloppiness and inadequacy. We've gone back again and again to Dealey Plaza and the Texas School Book Depository and the grassy knoll. In thousands of talk shows, magazine articles, newspaper columns, and books, we've heard the Cuban-exile theory, the Mafia theory, the Castro theory, the J. Edgar Hoover theory, the Jim Garrison theory, the CIA theory, the Texas-oil theory, the KGB theory, the E. Howard Hunt theory, the two-Oswalds theory.

We've seen documentaries and docudramas. We've watched the Zapruder film over and over again. We've heard sound experts tell us that the evidence proves that there was a fourth shot and therefore two gunmen. We've read cheap fiction about the assassination and superb fiction like

Don DeLillo's *Libra*. In the end, nothing has been resolved. If there was a conspiracy, the plotters got away with it. Twenty-five years have passed. Kennedy is still dead. And so is Oswald. And Ruby. And so many of the others. And in a peculiar way, the details of Kennedy's death have obliterated both the accomplishments and failures of his life.

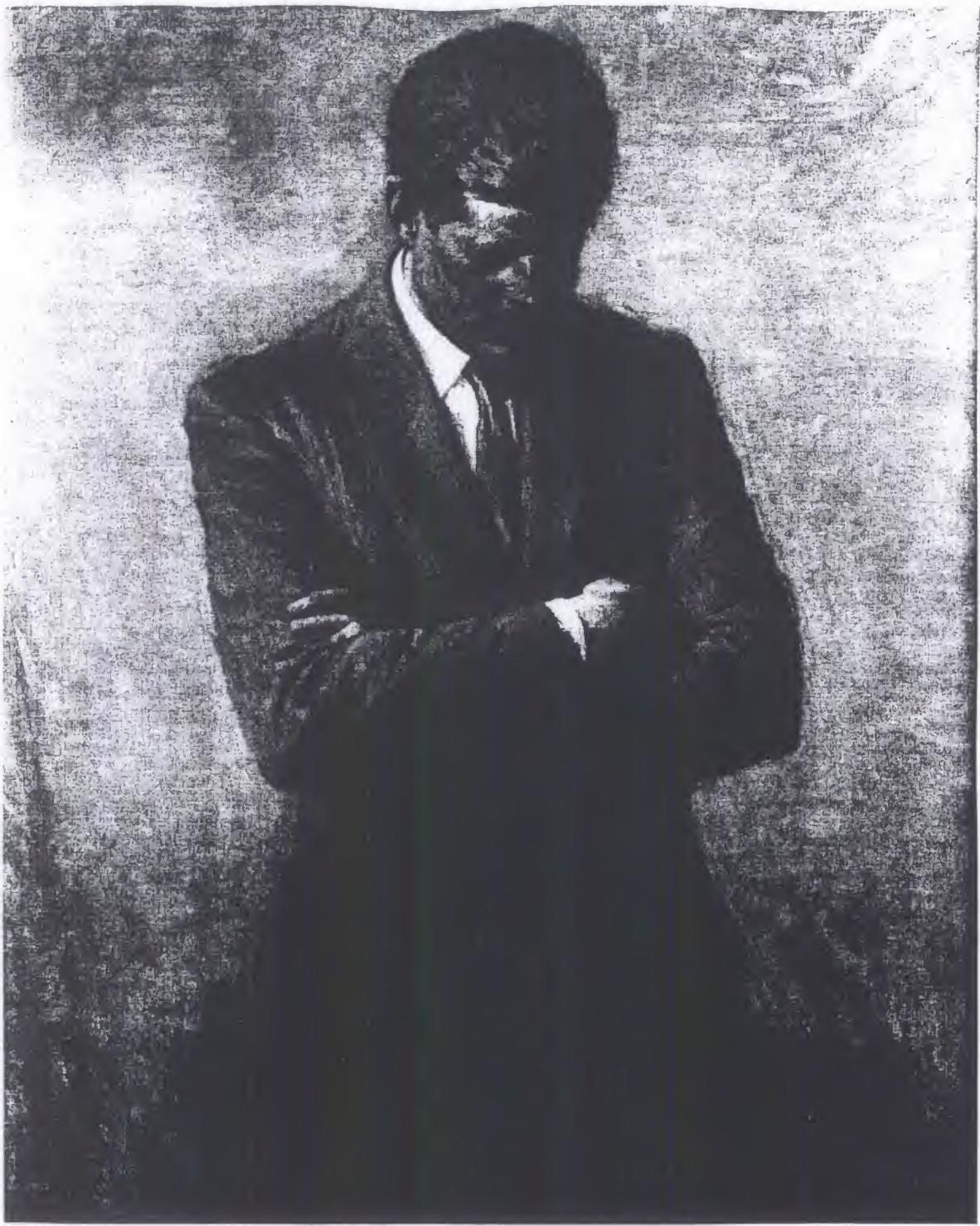
AT THE SAME TIME, OTHER TALES HAVE HELPED to debase the metal of the man: the smarmy memoirs of women who certainly slept with him and others who certainly didn't; the endless retailing of the gossip about his alleged affair with Marilyn Monroe, that other pole of American literary necrophilia; the detailed histories of the family and its sometimes arrogant ways. These days, with a renewed public hypocrisy in sexual matters, Kennedy has acquired the dreaded "womanizer" label, complete with half-baked theories about the origins of his supposed Don Juan complex. He was afraid of dying, say the theorizers. He was selfish and spoiled. He was revolting against his mother's rigid Catholicism or imitating his father's own philandering.

He was described in some gossip as a mere "wham, bam, thank you ma'am" character; other talk had him a hopeless romantic. By all accounts, he was attracted to beautiful and intelligent women, and many of them were attracted to him. And during the time he journeyed among us, this was hardly a secret. When I was a young reporter for the *Post* in late 1960, I was once assigned to cover Jack Kennedy during one of his stays at the Carlyle hotel. He had been elected but had not yet taken office. "We hear he brings the broads in two at a time," the editor said. "See what you can see."

There was nothing to see that night, perhaps because of my own naive incompetence as a reporter, or because I was joined in my vigil by another dozen reporters and about 100 fans who wanted a glimpse of John F. Kennedy. Most likely, Kennedy was asleep in his suite while we camped outside the hotel's doors. But I remember thinking this was the best news I'd ever heard about a president of the United States. A man who loved women would not blow up the world. Ah, youth.

Two other events helped eclipse the memory of Jack Kennedy. One was the rise of Robert Kennedy. In his own brief time on the public stage, Robert understood that Jack's caution had prevented him from fully using the enormous powers of the presidency. If Jack was a man of the fifties, the later Robert Kennedy was a man of the sixties, that vehement and disturbed era that started with the assassination in Dallas and did not truly end until Richard Nixon's departure from the White House in disgrace in 1974. The differences were often a matter of style: Jack was cool, detached, rational; Robert was passionate, wounded (by his brother's death, among other things), emotional. Jack was an Anglophile, a product of Harvard and the London School of Economics; Robert came from some deeper Celtic root.

The murder of Robert Kennedy in 1968 played a part in the revision of the Kennedy legend. In a quite different way, the process was completed by Chappaquiddick. Some who had been drawn to politics by Jack Kennedy at last began to retreat from the glamour of the myth. A few turned away in revulsion, seeing after Chappaquiddick only the selfish arrogance of privilege. Others faded into indifference or exhaustion. At some undefined point about a decade ago, the country decided it wanted to be free of the endless tragedy of the Kennedys. Even the most fervent Kennedy partisans wanted release from doom and death. They left politics, worked in the media or the stock market or the academy. A few politicians continued to chase the surface of the myth,



WORLD CLASS: KENNEDY UNDERSTOOD
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copping Jack Kennedy's mannerisms, his haircut, the "Let us go forth" rhythms of his speeches. Gary Hart, who even played with his jacket buttons the way Jack did, was the most embarrassing specimen of the type; others were in the Bob Forehead mold. They helped cheapen Jack Kennedy's image the way imitators often undercut the work of an original artist.

Out in the country, beyond the narrow parish of professional politics, the people began to look for other myths and settled for a counterfeit. It was no accident that if once they had been entranced by a president who looked like a movie star, then the next step would be to find a movie star who looked like a president.

| III |

THE MISTAKES AND FLAWS OF THE KENNEDY presidency are now obvious. Domestically, he often moved too slowly, afraid of challenging Congress, somewhat late to recognize the urgency of the civil-rights movement, which had matured on his watch. He understood the fragility of the New Deal coalition of northern liberals and southern conservatives; he had been schooled in the ways of compromise in the House and Senate and was always uneasy with the moral certainties of "professional liberals." When faced with escalating hatred and violence in the South, Kennedy did respond; he showed a moral toughness that surprised his detractors and helped change the region. But he was often bored with life at home.

Foreign policy more easily captured his passions. He was one of the few American presidents to have traveled widely, to have experienced other cultures. His style was urban and cosmopolitan, and he understood that developments in technology were swiftly creating what Marshall McLuhan was to call the "global village." But since Kennedy had come to political maturity in the fifties, he at first accepted the premises of the Cold War and the system of alliances and priorities that had been shaped by John Foster Dulles.

Even today, revisionists of the left seem unable to forgive the role that Kennedy the Cold Warrior played in setting the stage for the catastrophe of Vietnam. He had inherited from Eisenhower a commitment to the Diem regime, and as he honored that commitment, the number of U.S. "advisers" grew from 200 to 16,000. Kennedy encouraged the growth of the Special Forces, to fight "brushfire" wars. He instructed the Pentagon to study and prepare for counterinsurgency operations. In Vietnam, U.S. casualties slowly began to increase; the Vietcong grew in power and boldness; Diem concentrated his energies on squelching his political opposition in Saigon, and soon we were seeing those photographs of Buddhist monks incinerating themselves, while Madame Nhu and her husband (Diem's brother) became lurid figures in the public imagination.

By most accounts, Kennedy intended to end the American commitment to Vietnam after the 1964 election. But since he'd won in 1960 by only 118,000 votes, he didn't feel he could risk charges by the American right that he had "lost" Vietnam. So the guerrilla war slowly escalated, and such writers as David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan reported from the field the truth that the official communiqués too often obscured: The war was being lost. Kennedy sent his old Massachusetts adversary Henry Cabot Lodge to Saigon as the new ambassador. But events were moving out of control. Diem was assassinated in November 1963 (not, as legend has it, on Kennedy's orders). The quagmire beckoned, and at his death, Kennedy still hadn't moved to prevent the United States from trudging onward into the disaster.

BUT FOR MOST OF KENNEDY'S TWO YEARS AND TEN months as president, Vietnam was a distant problem, simmering away at the back of the stove. Kennedy's obsession was Cuba. It remains unclear how much he knew about the various CIA plots to assassinate Fidel Castro. But the two major foreign-policy events of his presidency were the Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961, and the missile crisis of October 1962. One was a dreadful defeat, the other a triumph.

According to Richard Goodwin and others (I remember discussing this with Robert Kennedy), Jack Kennedy had begun the quiet process of normalizing relations with Castro before his death. Although this, too, was to be postponed until after the 1964 elections, Kennedy had come to believe that Cuba was not worth the destruction of the planet.

Today, Castro is the last player of the Kennedy era to remain on the stage, his regime hardened into Stalinist orthodoxy. In Miami, the exiles have become citizens; young Cuban-Americans think of the old anti-Castro fanatics as vaguely comic figures. If Castro died tomorrow and the regime collapsed a week later, an overwhelming majority of the Miami Cubans would stay in Florida. But there is still a hard belief among the old exiles (and some factions of the American right) that Kennedy was responsible for the defeat at the Bay of Pigs because he refused to supply air cover. But detailed studies of the operation (most notably by Peter Wyden) make clear that even with air cover, the force of 1,400 white middle-class Cubans could never have prevailed against Castro's almost 200,000 militia and regular-army troops. Success had to depend upon a general uprising against Fidel and massive defections among his troops. Neither happened.

Today, it's hard to recall the intensity of the Cuban fever that so often rose in those years. I remember being in Union Square when the Brigade was going ashore. A week earlier, I'd actually applied for press credentials for the invasion from some anti-Castro agent in midtown; with great silken confidence, he told me I could go into Cuba after the provisional government was set up, a matter of a few days after the invasion. But from the moment it landed, the quixotic Brigade was doomed. And in Union Square on the second night, when it still seemed possible that the Marines would hurry to the rescue, there was a demonstration against Kennedy, sponsored by a group that called itself the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Its members chanted slogans against the president. A year later, a much larger group demonstrated during the missile crisis. In a strange, muted way, these were the first tentative signals that the sixties were coming. And later, after Dallas, when the world was trying to learn something about Lee Harvey Oswald, we all saw film of him on a New Orleans street corner, handing out leaflets. They were, of course, from the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

| IV |

AND YET.... And yet, across the years, learning all of these things from the memoirs and biographies and histories, understanding that Camelot did not exist and that Jack Kennedy was not a perfect man, why do I remain moved almost to tears when a glimpse of him appears on television or I hear his voice coming from a radio?

I can't explain in any rational way. I've tried. Hell, yes, I've tried. I've talked to my daughters about him, after they've seen me turning away from some televised image of Jack. They've seen me swallow, or take a sudden breath of air, or flick away a half-formed tear. They know me as an aging skeptic about



Campaigning on Broadway near Bowling Green on October 19, 1960

IDEALISM: IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN TO TODAY'S YOUNG THAT NOT SO LONG AGO, MANY PEOPLE THEIR AGE BELIEVED THE WORLD COULD BE TRANSFORMED THROUGH POLITICS.

the perfectibility of man, a cynic about most politicians. I bore them with preachers about the need for reason and lucidity in all things. And then, suddenly, Jack Kennedy is speaking from the past about how the torch has passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace—and I'm gone.

There is more operating here for me (and for so many millions of others) than simple nostalgia for the years when I was young. Nothing similar happens when I see images of Harry Truman or Dwight Eisenhower. Jack Kennedy was different. He was at once a role model, a brilliant son or an older brother, someone who made us all feel better about being Americans. All over the globe in those years, the great nations were led by old men, prisoners of history, slaves to orthodoxy. Not us (we thought, in our arrogance). Not now. "Ask what your country can do for you," Kennedy said. "Ask what you can do for your country." The line was immediately cherished by cartoonists and comedians, and Kennedy's political opponents often threw it back at him with heavy sarcasm. But the truth was that thousands of young people responded to the call. The best and the brightest streamed into Washington, looking for places in this shiny new administration. They came to Kennedy's Justice Department and began to transform it, using the power of law to accelerate social change, particularly in the South. They were all over the regulatory agencies. And after Kennedy started the Peace Corps, they signed up by the tens of thousands to go to the desperate places of the world to help strangers. It's hard to explain to today's young Americans that not so long ago, many people their age believed that the world could be transformed through politics. Yes, they were naïve. Yes, they were idealists. But we watched all this, and many of us thought, This is some goddamned country.

OUT THERE IN THE WIDER WORLD, PEOPLE WERE responding to him as we were. It wasn't just Ireland or Europe. I remember seeing the reports of his 1962 trip to Mexico City, where a million came out to greet him, the women weeping, the men applauding him as fellow men and not inferiors. I'd lived in Mexico and knew the depths of resentment so many Mexicans felt toward the Colossus of the North. In one day, Kennedy seemed to erase a century of dreadful history. The same thing happened in Bogotá and Caracas, where four years earlier Richard Nixon had been spat upon and humiliated. This was after the Bay of Pigs. This was while the Alliance for Progress was still trying to get off the ground. I can't be certain today what there was about him that triggered so much emotion; surely it must have been some combination of his youth, naturalness, machismo, and grace. I do know this: In those years, when we went abroad, we were not often forced to defend the president of the United States.

We didn't have to defend him at home, either. He did a very good job of that himself. We hurried off to watch his televised press conferences because they were such splendid displays of intelligence, humor, and style. We might disagree with Kennedy's policies, and often did; but he expressed them on such a high level that disagreement was itself part of an intelligent process instead of the more conventional exchange of iron certitudes. He held 64 press conferences in his brief time in office (Reagan has held 47) and obviously understood how important they were to the furthering of his policies. But he also enjoyed them as ritual and performance. He was a genuinely witty man, with a very Irish love of the English language, the play on words, the surprising twist. But there was an odd measure of shyness in the man, too, and that must have been at the heart of his sense of irony, along with his

detachment, his fatalism, his understanding of the absurd. He was often more Harvard than Irish, but he was more Irish than even he ever thought.

I loved that part of him. Loved, too, the way he honored artists and writers and musicians, inviting them to the White House for splendid dinners, insisting that Robert Frost read a poem at the inauguration. He said he enjoyed Ian Fleming's books about James Bond; but he also brought André Malraux to the White House, and James Baldwin, and Pablo Casals. Perhaps this was all a political ploy, a means of getting writers and artists on his side; if so, it worked. Not many writers have felt comfortable in the White House in all the years since.

Part of his appeal was based on another fact: He was that rare American politician, a genuine war hero. Not a general, not someone who had spent the war ordering other men to fight and die, but a man who had been out on the line himself. When he first surfaced as a national figure, at the 1956 Democratic Convention, reporters rushed to find copies of John Hersey's *New Yorker* account of the PT-109 incident in the South Pacific. They read: "Kennedy took McMahon in tow again. He cut loose one end in his teeth. He swam breaststroke, pulling the helpless McMahon along on his back. It took over five hours to reach the island. . . ."

Reading the story years after the event, some of us were stunned. Kennedy was the real article. There had been so many fakers, so many pols who were tough with their mouths and avoided the consequences of their belligerence. Kennedy had been there, not simply as a victim but as a hero, a man who'd saved other men's lives. When he was president, that experience gave his words about war and peace a special authority. We also knew that his back had been terribly injured in the Solomons and had tormented him ever since. He had almost died after a 1954 operation, and he wore a brace until the day he died. But he bore his pain well; he never used it as an excuse; he didn't retail it in exchange for votes. Hemingway, another hero of that time, had defined courage as grace under pressure. By that definition, Jack Kennedy certainly had courage.

GRACE, WIT, IRONY, YOUTH, COURAGE: ALL combined to make us admire Kennedy. And there was one more thing: the speeches. Kennedy spoke too quickly; he often failed to pause for applause; his accent was strange to many Americans. But he made some of the greatest political speeches I've ever heard.

Most of them were written by Ted Sorenson (with occasional help from others, including Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Richard Goodwin). But Kennedy was not a mindless robot, reciting the words presented to him by his handlers. He was actively involved in the process of crafting each major speech, from sketching the broad outlines to changing (and often improving) specific language. Kennedy had written two books (*Why England Slept* and the best-selling *Profiles in Courage*) before becoming president. He originally wanted to be a newspaperman and sometimes mused about buying the *Washington Post* after he left office. He cared about words, and it showed in the speeches.

Looking again at the texts, I can hear his voice still coming to me across the decades, charged with urgency, insistent that the world must be challenged and life itself embraced. He never slobbered. He lifted no phrases out of cheap movies. All the revisionism cannot deny the quality of those words and the tough-minded decency of their message. Some excerpts:

To Baptist ministers in Houston, September 12, 1960:
"I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish. Where no public official either

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requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the pope, the National Council of Churches, or any other ecclesiastical source. Where no religious body seeks to impose its will, directly or indirectly, upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials. . . . For while this year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed, in other years it has been, and may someday be again, a Jew or a Quaker or a Unitarian or a Baptist. . . . Today I may be the victim, but tomorrow it may be you."

To the American people, after returning from Europe, June 6, 1961:

"Mr. Khrushchev made one point which I want to pass on. He said there are many disorders throughout the world, and he should not be blamed for them all. He is quite right. It is easy to dismiss as Communist-inspired every anti-government or anti-American riot, every overthrow of a corrupt regime, or every mass protest against misery and despair. These are not all Communist-inspired. The Communists move in to exploit them, to infiltrate their leadership, to ride their crest to victory. But the Communists did not create the conditions which caused them."

Reporting to the nation about the white mob violence attending James Meredith's entrance into the University of Mississippi and the decision to protect him with the National Guard, September 30, 1962:

"Even among law-abiding men, few laws are universally loved, but they are uniformly respected and not resisted. Americans are free, in short, to disagree with the law but not to disobey it. For in a government of laws and not of men, no man, however prominent or powerful, and no mob, however unruly or boisterous, is entitled to defy a court of law. If this country should ever reach the point where any man or group of men by force or threat of force could long defy the commands of our court and our Constitution, then no law would stand free from doubt, no judge would be sure of his writ, and no citizen would be safe from his neighbors."

In a commencement address at American University, about the need to negotiate with the Soviet Union, June 10, 1963:

"What kind of peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and to build a better life for their children—not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women—not merely peace for our time but peace for all time....

"So, let us not be blind to our differences—but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

To the nation, on civil rights, June 11, 1963:

"We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home—but are we to say

Photograph by Katherine Lambert.

to the world and, much more importantly, to each other that this is a land of the free except for Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes?"

Receiving an honorary degree at Amherst, October 26, 1963:

"The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness. But the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, especially when that questioning is disinterested, for they determine whether we use power or power uses us.

"Our national strength matters. But the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much. This was the special significance of Robert Frost. He brought an unsparing instinct for reality to bear on the platitudes and pieties of society. His sense of the human tragedy fortified him against self-deception and easy consolation. 'I have been,' he wrote, 'one acquainted with the night.' And because he knew the midnight as well as the high noon, because he understood the ordeal as well as the triumph of the human spirit, he gave his age strength with which to overcome despair...."

| V |

YEARS LATER, LONG after the murder in Dallas and after Vietnam had first escalated into tragedy and then disintegrated into defeat; long after a generation had taken to the streets before retreating into the Big Chill; long after the ghettos of Watts and Newark and Detroit and so many other cities had exploded into nihilistic violence; after Robert Kennedy had been killed and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; after Woodstock and Watergate; after the Beatles had arrived, triumphed, and broken up, and after John Lennon had been murdered; after Johnson, Nixon,

Ford, and Carter had given way to Ronald Reagan; after passionate liberalism faded; after the horrors of Cambodia and the anarchy of Beirut; after cocaine and AIDS had become the new plagues—after all had changed from the world we knew in 1963, I was driving alone in a rented car late one afternoon through the state of Guerrero in Mexico.

I was moving through vast, empty stretches of parched land when the right rear tire went flat. I pulled over—and quickly discovered that the rental car had neither a spare nor tools. I was alone in the emptiness of Mexico. Trucks roared by, and some cars, but nobody stopped. Off in the distance I saw a plume of smoke coming from a small house. I started walking to the house, feeling uneasy and vulnerable—Mexico can be a dangerous country. A rutted dirt road led to the front of the house. A dusty car was parked to the side. It was almost dark, and for a tense moment, I considered turning back.

And then the door opened. A beefy man stood there, looking at me in a blank way. I came closer, and he squinted and then asked me in Spanish what I wanted. I told him I had a flat tire and needed help. He considered that for a moment and then asked me if I first needed something to drink.

I glanced past him into the house. On the wall there were two pictures. One was of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The other was of Jack Kennedy. Yes, I said. Some water would be fine.



STIRRING: "OUR NATIONAL STRENGTH MATTERS. BUT THE SPIRIT WHICH INFORMS AND CONTROLS OUR STRENGTH MATTERS JUST AS MUCH."